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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 001248

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAI POLITICAL PARTIES DIG IN AND BRACE FOR THE WEEKEND

Classified By: Ambassador Ralph L. Boyce. Reason 1.4 (B,D)

¶11. (C) Summary. Both sides dug in deeper on March 1. Thaksin insisted that he will not resign, snap elections will be held on April 2, and he will hold his own rally this Friday at Sanam Luang to kickoff his election bid. Opposition party leaders did not waiver (publicly) from their threat to boycott the election if the PM does not resign by Sunday--the day of the next People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) rally. Preparations for the April 2 vote are under way; March 3 will be the last day that the opposition can reverse its boycott and register. Absent real news, the local press spun yesterday's lunch between the PM and top military leaders--designed to highlight military support for him--into a series of speculative stories, prompting the military's Supreme Commander to reaffirm publicly the military's neutrality. As fortune would have it, the Ambassador is hosting dinner this evening for Thai Army Commander GEN Sonthi; ranking members of Sonthi's staff and members of the Country Team will also be present. Meanwhile, preparations for the election continue, but that is only one--albeit important--piece of the political drama that is playing out daily. End Summary.

RETURN TO DEFIANT FORM

¶12. (SBU) The embattled Prime Minister returned to form late on February 28, dismissing calls for his resignation and instead announcing that he and his supporters will hold their own rally at Sanam Luang on March 3, only two days before the opposition is scheduled to hold their own gathering at the same location. Thaksin dropped the conciliatory tone he had adopted earlier in the day when he had suggested delaying the election, telling reporters that the opposition should "forget about making me resign...I'll speak my mind on March 3...I'll tell all." Thaksin dismissed further negotiations with the opposition parties, saying "I have tried my best but they would not cooperate."

¶13. (SBU) The usually fractious opposition remained united into March 1. Despite rumors that Thaksin and his Thai Rak Thai party had offered significant enticements to Chat Thai leader Banharn Silapa-Archa (whose propensity for cash politics lent him the name "Walking ATM" in the 1990s), Banharn and the leaders of the Democrat and Mahachon parties reiterated their intent to boycott the election unless Thaksin resigns by March 5.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE ELECTION ON TRACK

¶14. (SBU) Following the opposition's insistence on a boycott, the Election Commission began its efforts to set up the April 2 vote. Registration for the 100 party-list seats is open March 2-3, with registration for the 400 constituency seats open from March 4-8. A party must register for the party-list seat vote in order to run for a constituency seat, however, making Friday, March 3 the effective drop-dead date for the opposition to reverse its stance and join in the election--if it is held April 2.

PRESS STIRS THE RUMOR POT

¶15. (C) In a bid to dispel rumors of fading military support for his leadership, Thaksin lunched with top military commanders February 28. The plan backfired. Several local papers reported March 1 that Army Commander General Sonthi Boonyaratklintachai had warned the PM that he should resign for the good of the country. Supreme Commander Gen. Ruengroj Mahasaranond attempted to set the record straight later on March 1, telling reporters that "There will be no (military involvement in a change of government)...the situation is still going well." According to Embassy contacts, the author of the initial, detailed (unattributable) article on the story probably was the wife of a senior military official who has written articles critical of Thaksin in the past.

¶16. (C) Reporters also ushered in a new round of speculation that the PM would resign, citing unconfirmed reports that Thaksin had asked for a meeting with Privy Councillor

Chairman Prem Tinsulanonda also today. A Thai Rak Thai spokesman quickly denied this rumor, followed by the PM himself. "I will be...prime minister until the election is done and a new government formed."

COMMENT

17. (C) As things stand now, the historic ground at Sanam Luang will witness dueling political rallies this coming weekend. Both sides can be expected to mobilize large numbers. We're keeping a close eye on March 3--the deadline for the opposition parties to register in time for the April 2 election.

BOYCE